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## Howard council to consider Long Reach Village Center parking resolution

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Among the legislation pre-filed for the County Council's consideration in January is a resolution outlining the next step in a new start for Columbia's Long Reach Village Center.

Council resolution 2, introduced by Councilman Calvin Ball, an east Columbia Democrat, addresses "phase 1" of an urban renewal plan for the struggling shopping center.

The resolution would transfer 201 county-owned parking spaces to the owner of the site of the former Safeway in the village center, which later became a Family Market grocery store before the business was evicted for failing to pay rent. The space has been vacant since July 2013 and is currently up for sale.

Ball, whose district includes Long Reach, said the parking allotment would help "ensure whoever owns that property has sufficient parking."

"We have to make it viable for another entity to purchase it; otherwise, the county's going to have to purchase it," Ball said. If the site isn't sold to a private business or organization by mid-January, the county will be on the hook to buy the property for \$2.5 million, according to Councilman Greg Fox, a Republican from Fulton.

Plans for Long Reach's revitalization have been in motion since March 2014, when the council passed a bill declaring the village center – which, according to a recent study, had a 65 percent vacancy rate – a "blight zone."

In October, the county purchased most of the shopping center – except for the Safeway site, a deli, a liquor store, a gas station and an arts center belonging to the Columbia Association – for \$5 million.

Redevelopment plans for the center have not yet been fully conceived, although a popular scenario envisions Long Reach transformed into a community arts center, joining the Columbia Art Center, which is already located in the village center, with the Howard County Arts Council, which would move to Columbia from its current headquarters in Ellicott City.

Celebration Church, a congregation also located in the Long Reach Village Center, has its eyes on the Safeway space.

Reached by phone on Monday, church elder Robert Jackson said securing parking would help the church seal the deal.

Jackson said Celebration Church is eager to find some room to expand: "We've been here a long time and we're still in the trenches here. We've grown right out of our building."

But Fox said he opposes Ball's legislation because, in his view, it doesn't allow enough opportunity for public input into the revitalization process.

"We haven't even had our whole public process regarding how we would be dealing with our parcel and we would be giving up [parking] rights that are worth dollars without being compensated for them," he said.

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He added that giving up parking to a private entity could limit the county's plans for the rest of the center: "This was supposed to be done as an overall community thing for the whole area that was blighted; yet, somehow, we're making a decision that could impact the ability to do other things there. ... There's more questions on this than answers."

Ball said the transfer of parking spots would make the property more desirable for purchase, whether by the church or another entity, in a time when County Executive Allan Kittleman has been looking to cut the budget to make up for a revenue shortfall this fiscal year.

"I don't think it hampers the county per se" to give up some parking spots, Ball said, and added that the plan had always been for a private entity, such as Celebration Church, to purchase the space.

"I think this helps move that [plan] forward and helps ensure we move forward as had always been contemplated by the community and by the council," Ball said.

The resolution is set to be introduced at the council's legislative session Jan. 5.